

Archbishop Justin Welby: 'Reconciliation doesn't always mean agreement'

by [Trevor Grundy](#)

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) Bishops of the world's third-largest Christian tradition are gathering in Canterbury for the start of a six-day meeting to discuss the future of their communion.

But averting a split may not be possible.

Archbishop Justin Welby said the 85 million-strong Anglican Communion would still be a "family" even if some national churches went their "separate ways."

In an interview with the BBC's Radio Four Monday (January 11), he said he wants reconciliation, but he said that "reconciliation doesn't always mean agreement. ... It means finding ways of disagreeing well."

On Sunday, 105 senior Anglican leaders sent a letter to Welby and Archbishop of York John Sentamu arguing that the Church of England has failed to care for LGBT Christians and calling on the church to "apologize for our part in perpetuating, rather than challenging, ill-informed beliefs."

Meanwhile last week, Archbishop Stanley Ntagali of Uganda told the media he would not attend the meeting so long as "godly order" was not established.

Ntagali is part of the Global Anglican Future Conference, or GAFCON, which is no longer cooperating with the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and the Anglican Church of Canada because of their commitment to same-sex marriage as well as the ordination of gays and lesbians.

Most of GAFCON's conservative prelates said they will travel to Canterbury because they received a personal invitation from Welby. But they may only attend a preliminary gathering.

The meeting has been convened by Welby to discuss how it might overcome bitter quarrels over LGBT inclusion as well as women's ordination—quarrels that have brought the global communion to the brink of schism.

If unity is not reached, there is a growing fear that several of the larger African churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Sudan may bolt.

Those threats amount to “the language of warfare,” said Fred Hiltz, the archbishop of the Canadian church.

Also expected at Canterbury is Foley Beach, the primate of the Anglican Church in North America, a rival group to the Episcopal Church. Beach, who was invited to Canterbury by Welby, will be there to support those Anglican churches opposed to LGBT inclusion.

Welby has floated the idea of persuading the global communion to stay loyal to the mother church in Canterbury, if not necessarily to one another. He will propose a looser federation as a way to keep the feuding churches united.

“A schism would not be a disaster,” Welby said. “God is bigger than our failures. It would be a failure. It would not be good if the church is unable to set an example to the world of showing how we can love one another and disagree profoundly because we are brought together by Jesus Christ, not by our own choice. This isn't a club, or a political party. It is something done by God.”